

# BOOK REVIEW

## LEADERSHIP CAN BE TAUGHT

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It is not often we get the opportunity to get an insider's view of an effective teacher, but Sharon Parks does just that. Parks not only writes about her observations of Ronald Heifetz's leadership classroom at Harvard, she also adds richness and depth.

Ronald Heifetz and his colleagues are valued innovators in teaching leadership to mid-career professionals enrolled in the various Harvard graduate programs. They teach their students not only about leadership, but also how to lead. Their radical pedagogy intentionally places instructors under the microscope of leadership analysis in the crucial position of explicitly modeling leadership in the actual conduct of the course.

I recommend reading Parks on Heifetz before reading Heifetz on Heifetz, due to her insightful and extensive observation of his classes. Parks' discussion is rich and deep on the nature of leadership in these complex, changing times. She adds her own wisdom on leadership and spiritual development as she presents to the reader the unique pedagogy of a leadership course at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. Parks considers this pedagogy a very effective way to shatter the pervasive myth that leaders can't be taught.

Parks is known among educators as the scholar who deepened Fowler's classic moral development theory by studying and describing moral growth during the college years. She is currently director of leadership for the New Commons at the Whidbey Institute near Seattle, and holds a faculty position at Seattle University. A core theme of her current work is the new commons: "We have moved into the postindustrial, nuclear, information-rich, and ecologically informed age in which an intensified connectivity and complexity are primary features of the landscape – the new

commons" (p. 204).

In this complex context for leadership, leaders who only consider the goals of their own organizations and localities are often frustrated or blindsided. Parks believes this is because the current complex setting for leadership requires "systems thinking," as Senge puts it. In other words, leaders need to understand how their particular organization affects and is affected by other systems in the global setting, for example, other stakeholders, other economies, and the ecosystem.

She calls for leadership to go beyond solving technical problems - problems for which we have the tools. Problems today are so complex, because of their systemic nature, that leadership must know how to call on the problem-solving abilities of all of those in the organization, in ways that allow all to be creative and adaptive. In effect, leaders must change the very process of problem-solving to become one of learning together, as occurs in Heifetz' classroom.

Observing Heifetz' classroom confirmed Parks' view that leadership is more of an art than a technique. She uses the metaphor of an artist who learns to paint landscapes by first learning how to mix colors in every possible shade of gray, without using black or white. The training of an artist takes time and reflection. Artists do not benefit from lectures about art. They benefit from creating art - by making mistakes and learning from them. This metaphor also describes Heifetz' experiential leadership pedagogy.

He calls it the "case-in-point" method, in that he illustrates key elements of the artistry of leadership by using his classroom as a case in point. Both in a large lecture setting and in small-group sections, the students themselves create an art studio or lab for leadership learning. In addition to

the required readings on leadership, students are encouraged to bring out their own failures and successes in leadership as core material in their small groups. Heifetz begins with the students' current expectations of pedagogy and leadership. As students examine their presuppositions, his purpose is to move his students away from their default settings (their presuppositions about leadership) such that they can learn the true artistry of leadership.

They learn by doing - by examining the dynamics in their groups. He says, on the first day of class, "By [case in point], I mean that the dynamics that take place in this classroom, including the dynamics between you and me and amongst you, will be available for us to examine. You need to be aware of what is going on in the room. Jesuits call it 'contemplation in action' - I speak of it as getting on the balcony so you can see the dance floor, and you need to get there several times a day. Reflection in action. It's very difficult to do" (p. 27). He points his students to core elements of leadership occurring in the classroom, such as: how to reveal the hidden question or the real work that needs to be done in a group, how factions form on different sides of a question, how authority is established and differs from leadership, how group members avoid the real work that needs doing, and how a leader holds the group on task.

Parks does a better job of revealing the social dynamics of leadership than do other authors who agree that leaders can no longer lead adequately as a Lone Ranger using command-and-control methods. Parks shows how leadership is a social construction of the organization itself. This book presents a view of leadership constrained by the social web surrounding the leader.

Parks emphasizes throughout the book that Heifetz' is a daring teaching method. Key risks are the high disappointment levels experienced by students not receiving the expected teaching mode. Heifetz takes on the additional burden of pushing reluctant students to unlearn what they know about teaching itself, all in the process of pushing them to learn a new, and distinctly unheroic, paradigm of leadership. The classroom is alternately chaotic, contemplative, and confusing for students - and often quite frustrating. However, end-term comments by his students show very high levels of learning in one semester. Heifetz goes to these pedagogical lengths in order to give students a new way of thinking that will allow them to lead in the current global system.

The reader has to read about Heifetz in action in order to begin to understand his pedagogy. For those of us who teach about leadership, and especially those who teach how to lead, I consider this book a "must read."

## REFERENCE

- Parks, S. D. (2005). *Leadership Can be Taught*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.